



harm reduction
COALITION

Testimony before the
Committee on Public Health Connecticut
On SB 257
An Act concerning Hepatitis C Testing

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On behalf of the Harm Reduction Coalition, I appreciate the invitation to testify before you today at this hearing on public health.

Harm Reduction Coalition is a national organization founded in 1993 and incorporated in 1994 by a working group of needle exchange providers, advocates and drug users. Today, we are strengthened by an extensive and diverse network of allies who challenge the persistent stigma faced by people who use drugs and advocate for policy and public health reform.

The problem

HCV infection is the most common chronic blood borne infection in the United States. It affects approximately 3.2 million people, yet 45-85 percent of HCV cases in the United States remain undiagnosed. Each year more than 17,000 Americans are infected and 15,000 people die from liver disease, which surpasses deaths related to HIV. We are encouraged by the introduction of SB 257 because testing this "baby boomer" population will make strides to identify cases of HCV in a birth cohort which comprises 75 percent of all cases in the US. People born from 1945 through 1965 are five times more likely to be infected with Hepatitis C.

Liver disease, liver cancer and deaths from Hepatitis C are on the rise. According to the CDC - of the estimated 3.2 million Americans with chronic hepatitis infection, about half of them don't know it. Chronic hepatitis C is most common in "baby boomers" -- about two thirds of U.S. infections are in people born between 1945 and 1964.

The solution

The vast majority of people with hepatitis C do not know they have it and are at greatly increased risk for advanced liver disease, liver cancer, and death. According to the CDC, if everyone born between 1945 and 1965 were tested, over 800,000 cases would be identified, and up to 121,000 deaths could be avoided. As a result, the CDC now recommends one-time HCV screening for all baby boomers. Connecticut can take a major step in ending the Hepatitis C epidemic by promoting cost-effective guidelines for the screening of baby boomers. We can never hope to achieve the legitimate public health goal of curing HCV without the active involvement of medical professionals in affirmatively offering HCV tests to patients born between 1945 – 1965. This policy by the CDC requires medical provider cooperation to be actualized. Hepatitis C is curable – but you can't be treated if you've never been diagnosed. We hope that within a few years, we'll be able to say that this legislation marked the beginning of the end of the hepatitis C in Connecticut.

Harm Reduction Coalition is calling for passage of SB257. The Harm Reduction Coalition is a national health policy advocacy and capacity-building organization that promotes the health and dignity of individuals and communities impacted by drug use.